

COMMUNIST ATROCITIES AT BUCHENWALD

BY DONALD B. ROBINSON

WHEN the United States Army liberated the infamous Buchenwald Concentration Camp on April 11, 1945, it found that the 60,000 inmates had been dominated for three years by an underground organization composed of German Communists who used Gestapo-like tortures on their fellow-prisoners in an effort to rule them. American Army investigators discovered evidence that Communist cruelty at Buchenwald rivaled the savagery of the Nazis. The investigators, assigned to the Twelfth Army Group, arrived at the camp only a few hours after an American tank column had driven off the 1700 SS Death's Head Guards.

After interviewing the prisoners, digging through the records and then checking and cross-checking their facts, the Americans returned to the headquarters of the Twelfth Army Group with one of the most startling reports to come out of World War II. It was forwarded through military channels to SHAEF with this covering statement:

It is not just another report on a concentration camp. It does not deal ex-

clusively with the horrors of life in Buchenwald, nor with the brutalities of the Nazi pervers. It is the story of wheels within wheels. It tells how the prisoners themselves organized a deadly terror within the Nazi terror.

It is one of the most significant accounts yet written on an aspect of life in Nazi Germany.

The U. S. Army probe uncovered detailed evidence that a band of three hundred German Communist prisoners had seized control of a self-government system set up by the Nazis among the inmates of Buchenwald, and had then employed it to command and terrorize the camp population. The Communists' victims were numbered in the thousands.

THE report first passed over my desk when I was on duty at General Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters. Once I had studied it, I understood, finally, a remark made to me several days before by a German named Mueller who was a survivor of Buchenwald.

He was forty-five years old but he looked closer to seventy. His hair was white, his face gaunt. It seemed a superhuman effort for him merely to

DONALD B. ROBINSON was for a time Chief Historian for U. S. Military Government in Germany, with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. Prior to that he was a Civil Affairs officer in France. Dial Press will soon publish a book by him on labor.

take off his serge jacket and his gray flannel shirt.

"Do you see it?" he asked in heavy, guttural English.

I saw it. His pathetically thin, stooped back was criss-crossed with the red scars of countless beatings.

"That," he asserted, "is my diploma from the Buchenwald Concentration Camp."

A Social Democrat, Mueller had been an official of a German trade union in the years before Hitler. He had managed to retain his freedom until 1938, when the Gestapo caught up with him and sent him to Buchenwald. He survived its agonies by sheer miracle.

"Did the Gestapo do that to you?" I inquired.

"Some of it, but not all," he answered. "Many of those scars were given me by my fellow prisoners because I did not agree with their politics."

That was all he would say. After I had read the Army report, I understood the rest.

II

WHAT happened at Buchenwald was truly appalling. What the Nazi barbarians did to their prisoners was beyond imagination. Unfortunately, certain German Communists made conditions even more unbearable.

Buchenwald, it will be remembered, was one of the first major concentration camps freed by the Allies. It was

there that the gas chambers, the torture hooks, the typhus experimental laboratories, the unburied bodies and the thousands of living corpses were first seen. General Eisenhower wept when he inspected it. The late, tough General Patton refused to enter for fear he'd become ill at the sights within.

A check of the camp records showed that it was set up by the Nazis in 1937. They used it exclusively then for three categories of German prisoners: political, criminal and Jewish. The political group consisted largely of Communists.

With the occupation of Austria in 1938, the Gestapo began to send foreigners to Buchenwald, too. Soon its rolls reached a peak of 60,000 and the SS officials found themselves swamped. They did not have enough guards to cope with the problem of administering so many inmates. It was then that they inaugurated the self-government program which the Communists were later to capture. The American investigators' report stated: "Unable to manage the prisoners alone, particularly as foreigners began to arrive, the SS instituted a system of self-administration (*Selbstverwaltung*), culminating early in 1940 in the appointment of police-trusties (*Lagerschütz*) from among the inmates."

These trustees, it seems, were given broad powers over the other prisoners. Initially they were chosen from among the ordinary German criminals, men confined as murderers, thieves and thugs. In 1942, however,

the German Communists began to "infiltrate" among them. They were able to do this because, in the words of the report:

They were the oldest residents with records of ten to twelve years in the concentration camps, and had thus built up personal relationships and experience which made them the logical appointees for positions of power. They clung together with remarkable tenacity, whereas the criminal elements were simply out for their own individual welfare, and had little group cohesiveness.

The report added:

The Communists maintained excellent discipline and received a certain amount of direction from outside the camp. They had brains and technical qualifications for running the various industries established at the camp. They made themselves indispensable.

The criminal elements, it was learned, tried to fight back as the Communists began to win control of the self-government organization. Their opposition was in vain. Working closely together, the German Communists were able to kill them or force them all out of office.

THE Army report, speaking of the Communists' rise to power, explained:

Their advances were not made without resistance from the criminals, but gradually the criminals were eliminated from power, partly by intimidation, partly with the aid of the SS.

Numbers of the criminals were killed by beatings, hangings or injections of phenol into the heart, or of air or milk into the veins. The injections were a specialty of

the camp doctor who became a partisan of the Communist faction.

The name of this physician was said to be Dr. Waldemar Hoven.

Soon a Communist was designated as the Camp Elder No. 1 (*Lager-Aelteste Eins*), the top prisoner position. He saw to it that his followers were appointed to other ranking posts. They in turn had German Communists assigned to such key spots in the camp administration as the labor office, the food supply office, the hospital. Before long, the Communists had complete control over virtually every inmate in the camp. The Nazi commandant of the camp and the SS guards were perfectly willing, the Army investigators found, to let the Communists have a free hand with all these inmates just so long as they managed them "efficiently." It appeared that prisoners who agreed with the Communists ate; those who didn't starved to death. Those who openly opposed the Communist sway were beaten, tortured or killed.

It was stated categorically by the Army report that: "The Communist trustees were directly responsible for a large part of the brutalities committed at Buchenwald. . . . Not all the beatings and killings were done by the SS guards." A list of German Communist trustees who committed such acts was compiled by the Army. At the head of it was a man named Hauptmann, who was the Assistant Camp Chief (*Kontrollleur*). Of him, the report asserted:

Eye-witness testifies that Hauptmann kicked prisoners in the testicles and beat them but always stopped when under observation of certain individuals known to have connections outside the camp. Hauptmann speaks English well. He talks like a sadist, his eyes gleaming with pleasure as he tells how "we disciplined this camp." Like many of the Communist leaders, "discipline" is his favorite word.

Other trustees cited by the Army for such bestialities included: Property-Room Chief (*Kapo-Effektenkammer*) Heinz Bausch and *Kapo* Dietsch of Block 46. This was the "injection block" of barracks, and Herr Dietsch was described as the "Private Executioner."

So many of the other German Communist inmates of the camp were reported also to have been guilty of these atrocities that the Army report simply cited them by category. They discovered that virtually all of the police trustees and almost all of the block chiefs in that section of Buchenwald known as the "Small Camp" had participated. These block chiefs in the "Small Camp" were said by the report to have mistreated the inmates under them mercilessly: "Besides personally beating their charges, these individuals sometimes forced whole blocks to stand barefoot in the snow for hours, apparently on their own initiative."

III

THE most important Communist stronghold at Buchenwald was the Labor Office. There it was that in-

mates were given work assignments or selected for transport to places like the dreaded Dora Camp at Mittelbau, which meant practically certain death. According to the Army report:

The key position of power was the Labor Office (*Arbeitsstatistik*). Here assignments were made and transports put together. Though this function was nominally performed by an SS Labor Allocation (*Arbeits-einsatz*) Officer, the details usually devolved on the trustees working in the office. These were usually instructed only as to the number of prisoners required for a particular transport, and were left to choose the names themselves.

Thus the trustees, who in time became almost exclusively Communist Germans, had the power of life and death over all other inmates. They could sentence a man or a group to almost certain death by assignment to one of the bad transports.

It was through their domination of this office that the Communists were able to defeat two challenges to their sway. The first occasion arose early in 1943, when huge groups of Poles were brought to Buchenwald from the camp at Auschwitz. "In Auschwitz," the Army report said, "the Poles had occupied the same ruling position as the Communists had in Buchenwald. They attempted to capture the same sort of control in their new home." The German Communists were too well entrenched. Inmates of the camp stated that the Communists easily smashed the Polish campaign by having many of the Poles executed in the typhus experiment station.

The second threat to Communist security developed some months later when large groups of French and Bel-

gian prisoners were sent to Buchenwald. The Communists met it, witnesses said, by having many of the first convoys dispatched immediately to the Dora Camp:

Towards the end of the year, big transports of French and Belgians began to arrive. Because of their Western outlook, these, too, represented a menace to the German Communist rule. Almost all of the first convoys were shipped immediately to the dreaded Dora Camp, which meant almost certain death. Of the remainder, any who dared complain were placed immediately on transport.

AMONG the other Communist strongholds at Buchenwald was the prison hospital. Its staff was composed almost 100 per cent of German Communists. The Army investigators found that:

Hospital facilities were largely devoted to caring for members of the Communist Party. All scarce drugs (and many were scarce at Buchenwald) were reserved for Communist patients, and hospital food was available for members of the Party even if not absolutely necessary.

Anti-Communists, when they became ill, were left largely without care.

Another of the Communist citadels was the Food Supply organization. The Army men learned: "Favorite groups received reasonable rations while others were brought to the starvation level."

The Property Room, called *Effektkammer* in German, was also under Communist control. It received all the individual property of new prison-

ers as well as the paltry belongings of dead inmates.

When the SS guards fled from the camp to escape the advancing Americans, they took all the money and gold with them, but the Communist trustees grabbed everything else. Some they kept, some they distributed among their followers. The Army investigators found that: "Each Russian prisoner of war, for example, received a wrist watch as a token of solidarity. Each German trusty received good clothing and numerous other valuables." As a matter of fact, on the day Buchenwald was liberated, the Army intelligence men were astounded to note that the 300 surviving German Communists were dressed like "prosperous business men."

That was not the first prize that the German Communists cashed in on. Through their close relationship with the Nazi camp staff, they had also been able to get the lion's share of Red Cross and other parcels sent to prisoners. Of the thousands of packages sent by the French Red Cross to the French captives of Buchenwald, for instance, very few ever reached the addressees. The German Communist organization had decided that inasmuch as all prisoners were "comrades," all should share alike in the parcels which anyone received. With the agreement of the commandant, all parcels were turned over to the Camp Elder who was, of course, a German Communist. He gave them to the individual block leaders for division among the inmates of their

blocks. The Communist trustees, according to other prisoners, always received more than their fair share of these parcels. French prisoners who protested or who even went so far as to refuse permission for the diversion of their parcels were, it was said, put on "the transport list" to the death camps.

IV

As a result of the Army investigation, it was learned that the Communist underground at Buchenwald had maintained careful ties with Communist groups outside the camp. The report noted on this point:

Above the ostensible leaders of the trusty system was a group of mystery men. They took no prominent positions, but stayed in the background, acting as a political directorate. They received orders and information from outside the camp, and passed on orders and slogans to the Communist inmates.

The German Communist Party maintained an extraordinarily effective organization covering the whole country. But it was used only for liaison and was not risked on more active work. From Buchenwald an inmate went out regularly to establish contacts with a Communist courier bringing news and instructions. Bound by his loyalty to the party, the contact man never made use of his opportunity to escape personally.

At one time, the Buchenwald Communists, it was discovered, started laying the groundwork for a plot to overthrow Hitler. The date was September 1944. Few details of this project were ascertained, but it was deter-

mined that an Austrian Communist named Gustav Wagerer and a former Camp Elder, a German by the name of Roeschke, were the two leaders. Little came of the plan because someone participating in it talked too much in front of another Austrian prisoner named Straat. He passed the information on to a criminal inmate who told the SS. The Gestapo was immediately notified and shortly afterwards eight of the inmates involved were "struck off" the Buchenwald rolls.

IN ADDITION to the German Communists, the Army found that two other groups were well organized at Buchenwald. One was composed of Czech prisoners who had formed a "national committee" to represent them. All political factions from Right to Left were included on it.

The other was a Russian prisoner-of-war group, many captured Russians having been sent to Buchenwald for trying to escape. The Army report had some interesting remarks to make about relations between the Russian POWs and the German Communists: "The Russians were about 800 in number, after numerous mass executions had decimated their ranks. Though kept in separate blocks and distinguished by not having to wear camp numbers, they were treated exactly like the other inmates.

"Among them were a number of high officers, including from two to six colonels. Military discipline was maintained and the group kept pretty

much to itself. In the early days, they were terribly treated. Large numbers were killed at the camp. Later, their lot was bettered.

"Relations between the German Communists and the Russian prisoners of war were peculiar. The senior Russian officer, as representative of the workers' fatherland, had great influence over the German Communists. His word was law. However, he made little use of this advantage. Most of the Russian prisoners of war were evacuated before the Americans came."

It was discovered that even many non-German Communists were outspokenly bitter about their German fellow-believers: "There were thousands of non-German Communists in Buchenwald, particularly French, Dutch and Spanish. To some extent, these were absorbed into the German organization and took their orders from the Germans. A vast underground system of councils and meetings was built up to integrate them. Yet many did not like their German overlords.

"Many Russians and foreign Communists spoke of beating up the German Communists when the day of liberation arrived."

HOWEVER, a very shrewd *coup d'état* by the German Communists on that day of liberation averted any possible retaliatory action. Just as the first American tanks began to attack German troops in the vicinity, the 300 German Communists brought out

into the open three machine guns, fifty rifles and a number of hand grenades which they had stolen from the guards and hidden around the camp over the preceding several years. They opened fire on the remaining SS Death's Head guards and drove them off. They used the same weapons afterwards to dominate the 21,000 men and women still alive at Buchenwald until the U. S. Army took over.

V

WHAT were the motives of the German Communists at Buchenwald? When the Army investigators questioned members of the Communist organization on their brutal methods, they ran up against a blank wall. No Communist would admit more than that "the criminal elements were roughly dealt with in the struggle for power." Other prisoners told the Army that the German Communists justified their brutality on the ground that it was necessary for discipline. Conditions were far worse, they claimed, when the Nazis handled the inmates directly. According to these prisoners, the Communists were said to believe that "They assumed office to make Buchenwald a better place to live. To be able to do so, they had to produce a certain output of work, order and discipline. Thus their means were justified by the end."

After a consideration of all factors, the U. S. Army report analyzed the German Communists in this way:

"Sustained by the sacred egoism of their mission, by the thought of living to shape a Communist Germany, they lost their human idealism. They became hard, surviving not for themselves but in the name of the proletarian future of Germany, and thereby justifying many extreme methods of survival. . . ."

The Army official responsible for dis-

seminating the report concluded: "One thing is certain: There will have to be further investigation of the people of this and all concentration camps. Because the report makes it clear that in our search for decent, democratic elements which we can trust in Germany, we cannot accept at face value ALL those people who were incarcerated for opposing the Nazi brand of fascism."

